The Ascent of Love: Plato, Spinoza, Proust*

Martha Nussbaum

*NEW LITERARY HISTORY has been a pioneer in exploring the boundaries between philosophy and literature. Because of Ralph Cohen’s creativity and vision, the journal has asked hard, illuminating questions about the connections between philosophical form and literary content, about the moral vision embodied in works of narrative literature, about the role of genre and convention in the two disciplines, about the question of realism and antirealism. I feel great personal gratitude to Ralph and to the journal for the encouragement I received at the very beginning of my work on some of these questions, when Ralph agreed to publish an exchange between Richard Wollheim and me about Henry James’s The Golden Bowl, inviting a distinguished group of literary and philosophical critics to comment. Without that encouragement I might have been less confident about devoting so much of my time to those issues, and perhaps much of my subsequent work would have been delayed or perhaps would not have existed at all. The quite marvelous thing about Ralph is that very many people in many disciplines in the humanities can tell the same tale.

It would not be very profitable, I think, to pronounce in an abstract and general way on the role the journal has played in arbitrating what Plato calls the “quarrel of long standing” between the poets and the philosophers. It therefore seemed to me best to get on with the concrete exploration of that quarrel. I want to argue here that there is a part of the Western tradition of thought about love and its reform or “ascent” that cannot be well understood unless we do cross the boundaries that

*This paper is based on (and very much abbreviated from) one of my Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1993; the series was entitled Need and Recognition: A Theory of the Emotions; this portion was the first of four studies of the theme of the “ascent” or reform of love in the history of Western philosophy and literature. It followed an articulation of a general account of the relationship between emotions and judgments that ascribe importance or value to aspects of the world that we do not fully control, and a more specific exploration of compassion as an emotion that appears to escape some of the objections commonly brought against emotions as a class. The series is under contract to Cambridge University Press, under the title Upheavals of Thought: A Theory of the Emotions.

usually separate the disciplines: for when we do so we discover that the Platonic project has been formative for the development of parts of the narrative tradition as well. Since the juxtaposition of Plato and Spinoza with Proust seems to me of unusual intrinsic as well as historical value, I offer it as a chapter in the journal’s exploration of disciplinary boundaries.

I

So you want to love me, Felix said.

So you thought you’d kill yourself to punish me, Felix said in a voice just loud enough for Enid to hear.

In the hospital room when they were alone together he stroked her hand in secret, slowly he drew his fingers along the curve of her waist, her thigh. She felt his touch through the bedclothes, staring at him weak with love. At these times he said nothing; a kind of trance was upon them both, a languorous blood-heavy extinction of their minds. . . .

And they stared at each other half perplexed, trembling with anticipation, a desire so keen it must surely have charged the air in the room and anyone blundering inside would have known. Felix’s color was high, warm, his smile seemed involuntary, he was the one who had brought Enid Stevick the twelve creamy-white roses wrapped in tissue paper and smelling of cold; he was the one who had brought the Swiss chocolates in the plump red satin box there on the window-sill for Enid’s visitors to sample. Of all Enid Stevick’s relatives the nuns were most taken with her young Uncle Felix.¹

Since my topic is erotic love, I begin with a love story. Since I shall describe the ascent of love to the clear light of understanding, I begin with its descent into the murky viscous region of death. Enid Stevick, the heroine of Joyce Carol Oates’s novel You Must Remember This, is a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl in a small town in upstate New York—lithe, sly, secretive, a gymnast, hooked on the eel-like coiling feel of the undertow at Shoal lake, the icy dark water snaking up her body. Enid’s uncle Felix is a boxer, proud of his body, in love with sweat and blood. He made love to her once, drunk, thrilled by her recklessness. Then, shocked and frightened at his own action, he refused to see her. She attempted suicide.

But Enid did not die. And now Felix is with her and he loves her. From the hospital bed she goes to Felix’s bed, caring for nobody else but Felix, seeing nobody and nothing else, living for the hours with him in motel rooms, living for the obliteration of thought, for the wet undertow of desire as serpentine, as compelling, as the icy snakes of the lake-water:
Enid’s mind was extinguished. . . . She couldn’t draw a breath wholly her own, not Felix’s, half asleep she imagined he was breathing her breath for her, lying heavily against her, oblivious of her, as if they had fallen together from a great height. By degrees her frantic heartbeat always calmed but this too was Felix’s heartbeat. He gripped her tight, one arm awkwardly beneath her the other cradling her neck; if he slept he drew her down into sleep, the undersides of her eyes burned as she made her way through a grassy field or slope, the grass vibrantly green! so wonderfully green! and there she stood shielding her eyes against the glare of the sun on the lake. . . . She saw in the water a shadowy reflection not her own, she stared, she stared, she began to weep with desire, a need so desperate it could scarcely be borne, like the pleasure that rose so violently between her legs that was Felix’s to give or to withhold. (YMR 186)

In this love story we see many of the features of erotic love that philosophy has traditionally found disturbing, and has wished to cure. For even if one should grant that certain emotions connected with the well-being of others are valuable, one might still wonder whether a good human life should contain intense attachments to particular individuals. Such attachments, especially when they are of an erotic or romantic sort, seem to require attention to turn away from the world of general concern, and to rivet itself to a single life that provides in itself no sufficient reason for this special treatment. And they exact an intensity of focus that makes equal concern impossible. Enid’s father thinks about the good of his family, about national politics, about how liberalism can defeat McCarthyism. Enid is deaf to all these concerns, made deaf to compassion by love itself.

And if even compassion raises questions about the excessive neediness of emotion, if compassion already seems to come hand in hand with the inclination to revenge, how much stronger must this excessiveness and this ambivalence seem in the case of erotic love, with its wish to abdicate control over one’s life and action, with its active wish for the extinction of thought and choice. As Enid experiences love, passivity and uncontrol are constitutive features of its beauty. Even her breath seems not her own but his, to give or to withhold.

A need this deep can hardly be pure of retributive wishes. In Enid’s suicide attempt there is retribution, clearly, the wish to reassert control and to punish. To punish herself for her needs and her self-caused helplessness, to punish her body for what it had been caused to feel and to demand. To punish Felix above all, of course, for making her needy rather than self-sufficient, for being the source of both wonder and frustration. The needs of such a love are so deep that, like and continuous with the child’s need for totality, they can never, it seems, be fully or stably satisfied. Ambivalence and the tendency to revenge are thus built into its very structure.
For these reasons, philosophers have not often been friends of erotic love. Even those who include other emotions in their conceptions of good life and good thought tend to dislike the impure intensity of the erotic, which seems as subversive of the beneficent social passions as it is of nonpassionate calculation. (Adam Smith is a fascinating case of this.) On the other hand, they have also found in the erotic what Enid finds there: a mystery and depth, a tremendous power, without which life would be impoverished, lacking, perhaps, in the strongest sources of benevolence itself. Accordingly, few thinkers in the Western tradition have proposed the complete elimination of erotic love. What we find instead is a recurrent attempt to reform it, so as to keep its creative force while purifying it of ambivalence and excess and making it more friendly to general social aims. This tradition centrally uses the metaphor of an "ascent," in which the aspiring lover climbs a ladder from the quotidian love from which she began to an allegedly higher and more truly fulfilling love. In each case, moving the lover up the ladder involves both addition and subtraction; and we must ask whether what is left at the end still contains what was originally valuable and wonderful in love, whether it is still erotic at all and still love at all.

This project takes many forms; but one especially prominent strategy focuses on a notion of contemplative creativity. Its central idea is that the cure for the vulnerability of passion is the passion for understanding. By focusing on that intellectual goal, and on the goal of creativity that the tradition links with it, the pupil finds herself able to deal with the very same worldly objects without agonizing dependency, without ambivalence and the desire for revenge, without self-centered partiality. I shall investigate three leading exemplars of that strategy, holding the debate together by returning in each case to Enid and Felix, viewing Enid as my aspiring potentially "ascending" pupil, and asking what she will have to think, desire, be, in order to accomplish the path each of these thinkers has set out for her. Enid is, of course, a historical and cultural construct. The narrative of her love for Felix owes an obvious debt to romantic and Christian accounts of passion as well as to Platonism. But I think it does not distort either Enid's story or the philosophical works to find her at the beginning of the path that each describes.

Before the ascent of love is even in question, Plato's Symposium offers several accounts of unreformed love. As it does so, it reflects a powerful
cultural paradigm according to which *eros* is understood not as a relationship of mutuality, but as a longing for the possession of something seen as valuable and urgently needed. Lovers long for sexual intercourse, and they see intercourse as involving the active control or possession of an object. But what they are trying to achieve through this intercourse is something more complex, more urgent, and more problematic.

In the view of the comic poet Aristophanes, whose diagnosis seems the most pertinent to the eventual cure, Enid’s desire to make love with Felix is nothing less than a desire for her own wholeness or completion. We humans were originally whole and round, he says. We were “awe-inspiring in force and strength,” and “had great ambitions” (**S**190B). We thought we could displace the gods. Zeus punished us by making us needy and incomplete, godlike no longer. This incompleteness is revealed by the very form of our bodies, with their pointy jutting limbs, their oddly naked fronts. We believe that we can be restored to the wholeness of self-sufficiency through sexual intercourse, since in that insertion of one person’s body into another’s we attain something like the roundness and wholeness of “our earlier nature” (**S**191D).

This profound portrait of the roots of erotic love (which has a close resemblance to some contemporary psychoanalytic accounts) says in effect that erotic love is the acting out of a primitive fantasy of restored omnipotence. It seeks the magical result of complete control over the “transformational object,” and derives its deep power from its connection with these early projects. But these projects must fail, since we are finite and mortal. And moreover, love of this infantile sort, focused on possession and control, seems to prevent people from attaining the sort of relationship with one another within which real support and mutual aid is possible. It is no wonder that the dialogue is filled with images of favoritism and partiality, and also with the signs of love’s “mad” excess and ambivalence (see for example, **S**219C–e, 217E–218A, 213D5–6, 213D7–8).

Before Enid can begin the ascent of love described by Socrates’ teacher Diotima, she must understand the definition of love that he learned from her, which subtly revises the Aristophanic description. For love, it now develops, is indeed a desire for possession of an object—but the object must have a special character: it must be fine and good. “Love is not love of the half or of the whole, if that does not in some way happen to be good” (**S**205E). Indeed, she claims, the various types of striving that are commonly found—love of money, love of sport, love of philosophical study, love of sex—are all species of the same passion, though in general we reserve the name *eros* for the sexual kind (**S**205D). Enid is asked to see what all her pursuits have in common—her
gymnastics with her piano playing, her studies in school with her adoration of Felix. All are species of a common enterprise, in which all human beings are engaged: the effort to make the good one's own, and thus to become complete. The lovers described by Aristophanes are, then, really not seeking an "other half," except incidentally. A fuller explanation of their project is that they are seeking a good for themselves, and, through that good, their own flourishing.

Enid is already asked to see a certain unity in these varied pursuits, and thus a certain homogeneity in their objects. What one person gets by money-making another gets through sexual love. This does not directly entail that there is some one thing, the good, varying only in quantity, in terms of which the different objects are all commensurable. But to subsume them all under the rubric "good" is to make a powerful move in that direction. And if Enid knows Socratic arguments, she will know that insofar as several objects are called by a single name, thus far they have a single nature.10

What she wants from Felix is, then, the possession of a good for herself. The object of her passionate desire is that good, the good for her that resides in Felix, and not the entirety of Felix at all, insofar as he has features that are not part of that good. This will seem intuitively plausible to her. For how often she has wished that Felix were not her uncle, were not forbidden to her by law and by custom, were not a lover of many women. How often, too, she has wished that the passion and pleasure they share were not forbidden her by the church, were not a kind of uncontrol and death. She wants the good of it clearly, and how much she would like to be able to separate this powerful good from the condoms on the motel room floor and the smell of Airwick in the cheap bathrooms and the knowledge that Felix's "kiss meant so little, it was one of many thousands" (YMR 186). Once she begins thinking in this way, taking apart the woven strands of Felix and their passion into the good and the bad, it also seems plausible to her to believe that the good part has some pretty close connection with the good for herself that she pursues in playing the piano, in loving her parents. For isn't she in all cases trying to be complete and to flourish? And aren't these all ways she has of pursuing that single aim?

But before ascent can begin, Diotima has an important addition to make. Our pursuit of flourishing is constrained by awareness of our own mortality (S 207C ff.). We don't simply want to possess the good, we want to possess the good forever (S 206A, 207A). But we know we cannot achieve this. We therefore seek to create something of ourselves, engendering it out of ourselves in the good or fine thing we encounter—something that will itself outlive us and bear our identity.11 We do this, each of us, in ways that bear the mark of our own sense of who we
are. Some, like the other animals, conceiving of themselves as essentially bodies, seek continuity in physical procreation (S 207CD, 208DE). Others, however, identify themselves more fundamentally with their moral character, their speeches, their achievements. This sort of reproductive desire requires a receptive soul as its vehicle—although she adds that the body must also be attractive, for the procreative activity is still at its base erotic and bodily desire still plays a part in it (S 209B). In intimacy with a suitably receptive soul, this person will engender creative productions—speeches and works—in which her identity may live on. And this, not sexual intimacy itself, is the real goal of love.

Enid is asked, then, to look back at her lovemaking with Felix, and to see herself as trying to achieve not the impossible goal of possessing the whole of the person, a goal linked so closely with jealousy and revenge, but instead a goal both more benign and more available: the goal of creation. The claim is that all along Enid’s fundamental wish has been to use the intimacy with Felix as a vehicle by which she can create representations of herself that will give her possession of the good not only during her lifetime but also after her death.

At this point Enid is likely to rebel. For she does not see herself in this picture of creative aspiration. She certainly is not drawn to Felix as a vehicle for physical reproduction (when she does accidentally become pregnant the affair ends), nor, it seems, as a vehicle for any other sort of reproduction of herself. What draws her to him is a powerful need for his entire body and being, a need that she links with the extinction and loss of identity, not with its perpetuation.

Well, what is it that she sees in this man? Isn’t it, after all, the fact that he is in a sense her own double, the fact that he shares her taste for danger, that they are blood relatives and related by the love of blood and darkness? Isn’t her very desire to extinguish her mind in his arms a kind of creation, a creation of a dark mysterious beauty akin to death in which he is after all a suitable vehicle for her self-reproductive aspiration? Isn’t it a significant fact about their love that it does step in to take the place of death, that it pulls her back from death and is in itself a kind of life after death? That creation of the momentary ecstasy of darkness is not a counter-example to Diotima’s view, one might argue, it is a case of it. For what Enid finds deepest in herself, what she thinks of as most herself, that she reproduces in her lovemaking, in this way creating a life beyond the confines of her own.

If Enid can be convinced of this, she is ready for Diotima’s ladder. To take the first step she has granted these points: that the object of her love is not Felix but the good in him; that this good is closely akin to, if not thoroughly homogeneous with, all the other goods that people pursue in their many projects and actions; that her ultimate goal in this
lovenaking is to reproduce herself, thus making the good her own forever. Now she hears from Diotima that the first step in love’s ascent, the step suited to a young person such as herself, is “to go to fine bodies, and first . . . to become the passionate lover of one body, and there to engender fine speeches” (S 210A). This she has done; and if it is not exactly speech she has engendered, it is something of the spirit, something closer to speech than to the literal physical child which forces them apart.

“Then (s)he must notice that the fineness of a given body is akin to that in another body, and if it is necessary to pursue bodily fineness, it is very foolish not to consider the fineness of all bodies to be one and the same” (S 210B). In other words, noticing that the difference between Felix and other attractive bodies is relatively small, where the attractiveness itself is concerned, she decides to neglect those small differences and to pursue this fineness wherever it turns up. This seems to mean that Enid should seek sexual relationships with other men as well, rather than remaining obsessively fixed on Felix: for in these relationships too she can express and thereby reproduce herself. She is now more stable, since she is less dependent on the vicissitudes of a particular love, and can to a far greater degree choose the circumstances in which she will gratify her desires. She has begun to disentangle the good in Felix from the bad. “Noticing this she sets herself up as the passionate lover of all fine bodies, and relaxes her excessively intense passion for the one, looking down on it and thinking it trivial” (S 209B).

The real Enid will be very reluctant to undertake any such move. For she responds to Felix in a mysterious way, and she does not feel that he is simply one among many attractive bodies. This does not make sense of what she feels. On the other hand, she has already granted to Diotima that what she seeks in Felix’s body is something good and fine for herself, connected with her own flourishing. She has agreed that not all aspects of the real Felix are good. Once she has begun to think in this way, it will seem more natural for her to take the next step, granting to Diotima that there may be quite a few people with similarly fine properties of body, who might bear a similar relationship to her wishes. (Even so, in the novel, Enid, unhappy with the secrecy of her love, does begin to date boys of her own age, seeking in them the good without the bad.)

But Enid’s creative desire includes, we said, much more than the body; it focuses on the reproduction of something in herself that she feels as spiritually deep. Therefore it will be natural for her to feel a dissatisfaction with this stage, and to move toward a deeper concern for the character and psychology of her partner, a concern that had already played a prominent role in her original passion for Felix. She will
“consider the fineness of the soul more worthy of esteem than that of the body,” love a fine soul, and, says Diotima, create “speeches that will improve the character of the young” (S 210BC).

Enid now has a small question: how, precisely, did we move from the good for Enid to the morally good? For she thought that Diotima was talking about fulfilling one’s own deepest needs for self-expression. And now she is talking about esteem, and speeches that improve people’s character. But perhaps what most deeply expresses Enid is not so worthy of esteem, and maybe the speeches of her passion will not improve anyone’s character. Diotima now reminds her that what we are talking about is realizing one’s own conception of flourishing. Sexual love is one of many ways in which people attempt to put their idea of what is most important on the map of the world. But then, insofar as she is making such an effort to draw these characteristics out of herself and to reproduce them in the world through her love, she must after all think that there is something good and fine about them, whether in a narrowly moral sense or not.

All this Enid should concede. And yet, she will suggest, it is one thing to say that there is something wonderful and fine about her passion, it is quite another to say that we will give it out in speeches to improve the character of the young. Well, what does a romantic like Enid think the young should read? Romantics believe in romantic representations, Dionysians in Dionysian representations. Enid, a little of both, would not hesitate, presumably, to give the young the scenes of Oates's novel in which her passion is described. Or if she does hesitate, as she clearly does, isn’t it because she has reservations about the passion itself, about its adequacy as a complete expression of herself and what she wants from life? Because she also loves her parents and plays the piano and studies hard in school, and approves of her father’s concern about politics—and she has a sense that all of this is really part of a complete human life for her and for others, and not all of her being really is conveyed by what she does with her uncle in motel rooms, which in its narrowness of vision is at odds with these other parts. Thinking about how what she creates out of herself will work as reading for others forces her to concede that her conception of flourishing is incomplete without a broader social vision—“so that,” as Diotima says, “she is forced once again to reflect about the fineness of customs and laws and to see that there is a relatedness in all of this, so that she will think the fineness of bodies something trivial” (S 210C).12 Note that it is only at this point that bodily love, with its exclusive narrowness of vision, is scorned.

By now Enid has moved far away from Felix, by surveying reflectively the whole of her conception of the good: “and looking at the vast reach of the fine [s]he will no longer, like some servant, loving the fineness of
one boy or man, or of one way of life, remain enslaved to that and be contemptible and of little account; but turned toward the vast sea of the fine and reflecting, she will give birth to many fine and splendid speeches and thoughts in the abundance of her searching for understanding” (S 210D). At this distance, the difference between one fine thing and another does not bulk large in Enid’s vision. For as a reflective student of Socrates she recalls that things that are fine or good are, *qua* fine and good, thus far alike; and this means that she can think of her many pursuits of the good as having a unity, her many good objects as part of a single “sea.” Enid now creates abundantly, playing the piano, loving her fellow citizens, and loving, above all, the process of thought that brings her into a serene and controlling relation with so much goodness.

Felix has not disappeared from Enid’s life. For at each stage the objects left below are included in that which is loved, though assigned the lower status of the relatively “trivial.” But *how* is Felix included? Presumably Enid now sees him as one of the many fine bodies and souls, all of whom she in turn loves as parts of the “vast sea of the fine,” and all of whom provide her with abundant occasions for her own creation. She will hardly know his name—for in the very first step she already committed herself to the pursuit of his fineness rather than of *him*; in the second stage she decided that it was foolish not to treat all fine bodies as alike for creative purposes. Already then, she can say of herself what she unhappily said of him: “the kiss meant so little, it was one of many thousands” (YMR 186). But by now, looking at the whole array of good, she hardly sees individual persons at all; insofar as she sees them, their bodies will seem to her a set of peculiar shapes without urgent reference to her own erotic need. Indeed, her own body will seem increasingly impersonal to her, increasingly distant from her most urgent purposes; for it is with her mind that she controls the world.

But the final vision is yet to come—and it takes Enid away from even this calm contemplative interest in distinct persons and objects. “All at once,” with wonder and joy, she sees the tremendous radiance of the good and fine in all its unity; and she sees that this good of the world is permanent, eternal, beyond the particularities and mutabilities of bodies:

[S]he will see it as itself by itself with itself, eternal and unitary, and see all the other instances of the fine as partaking of it in such a manner that, when the others come to be and are destroyed, it never comes to be any more or less, nor passively suffers anything. . . . What do we think it would be like . . . if someone should see the beautiful itself—unalloyed, pure, unmixed, not stuffed full of human flesh and colors and lots of other mortal rubbish, but if [s]he could see the divine fineness itself in its unity? Do you think life would be miserable for a
person who looked out there, and contemplated it in an appropriate way and was with it? Or don’t you understand that there alone, where [s]he sees the fine with that faculty to which it is visible, it will be possible for [her] to give birth not to simulacra of excellence, since it is no simulacrum [s]he is grasping, but to true excellence, since [s]he is grasping truth? And as [s]he brings forth true excellence and nourishes it, [s]he will become god-loved, and, if ever a human being can, immortal? (S 210E6–212A7)

Felix is nowhere to be seen. For he cannot as such be seen at all by the intellectual faculty that is now preferred to all the senses. And that faculty sees the eternal unity of the fine in the universe, which does not change when individual fine things go in and out of existence. This unity is not even comparable to Felix. And the “being-with” or intercourse it offers, the pure light of intellectual understanding, itself so far surpasses the good of her physical erotic love that she now cannot even think the two together. They do not belong to the same faculty of sight, and “the sight of intellect begins to see clearly as the sight of the eyes begins to grow dim” (S 219A). She sees now that all along it was this unity that she loved, and that all her love for Felix was an attempt to get beyond Felix to this divine good.

There are no barriers to creativity for Enid now. For the object of her love will not refuse her, or surprise her, or leave her, or drive her to suicide, or extinguish her thought in the sweat of passion. Her love is free of instability and painful need: for its object is always available, and always steady, as is the activity in which she grasps the object. For these reasons it is free from ambivalence as well: for being no barrier to her control of her world, it gives no incentives to revenge. And since her object is the whole of the world’s goodness, and the unity in that goodness, her love does not play favorites. She does not obsessively devote herself to the one, but attends with impartial and neutral fairness to the claims of all. And yet, we may fairly say that it is the same eros that has driven her all along, with much of its splendor and its ferocious energy. For it was her longing for good itself that propelled her to and up the ladder, goading her on until all obstacles to its full satisfaction were removed. If Felix is still in the world, she can only wish him this deep fulfillment.

IV

Spinoza’s account of the therapy and ascent of love owes a large debt to the Platonist tradition. But it goes beyond Plato, I think, in its diagnosis of what is really wrong with love and its explanation of why and how understanding brings the cure.
Spinoza’s account of the ascent is presented in the context of his neo-Stoic theory of emotion. It begins from the assumption that all beings endeavor to preserve their being (pt. 3, prop. 6). Indeed, what a thing is is none other than this self-maintaining tendency (pt. 3, prop. 7). The situation of human beings is in consequence complex. On the one hand, as parts of the world of nature we are passive before its events, and highly limited in the power we have to maintain our being (pt. 4, props. 2, 3). Our force is “infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (pt. 4, prop. 3). It is impossible for a human being not to be a part of nature and therefore to endure passively the effects of external causes (pt. 4, prop. 4). Indeed, every individual thing in Nature is such that it can be destroyed by the power of some superior thing (pt. 4, Axiom). On the other hand, our distinctive form of self-maintaining activity is mental. And the mind has, as we shall see, powers of transcendence that can remove the person from this passive state.

As we are, we need many things. We therefore attend closely to our transitions—that is, to the significance of external things for the status of our own projects. Some things enhance our projects and our power, some diminish it. Emotions are our recognitions of these significant relations to external things, and thus acknowledgements of our own neediness and passivity before them. To have emotions is therefore to be in a state of “bondage”: “a man at the mercy of his emotions is not his own master but is subject to fortune” (pt. 4, Preface). Most people live this way, “being driven hither and thither by external causes, never possessing true contentment” (pt. 5, Scholium 42).

All this Enid will find relatively familiar, given her study of Plato. What is new is the emphasis on the necessary passivity of the human being in the world of nature, and on the way in which this passive dependence checks and inhibits our very being.

Where in all of this is love? Love, Spinoza argues, is an awareness of a significant transition in the direction of greater flourishing, combined with the idea of an external cause of that transition (pt. 3, Definition of the Emotions 6). In other words, it is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of love that we find a person (or thing) extremely helpful to us in preserving our being. Indeed, love just is nothing other than the recognition of that significance.

Spinoza insists that earlier philosophical definitions of love in terms of possession of an object, or unity with the object, do not go as deep as his does: his expresses the “essence” of the phenomenon, theirs merely one of its properties. What he seems to be saying is that mere possession is not intelligible as a goal without reference to the needs of the self: the reason why we want to control the one we love is that we recognize the urgent importance of that one to our very being, and therefore want to
secure to ourselves the source of the desired transitions in our being (pt. 3, Definition of the Emotions 6, Explication).

Spinoza explains well the connection Enid feels between the depth of her love and her feeling of powerlessness. The intensity of her love, Spinoza points out, is proportional to the deep need she acknowledges, the need that led her to attempt suicide when Felix refused to love her. And such love tends to be obsessive, riveting the mind to a single object and blotting out thought of all others (pt. 4, prop. 44, Scholium).

Since this is so, all love of external objects must be ambivalent. For the very same object that can cause a beneficial transition in my being may also fail to cause that transition, or cause one of an opposite sort; and the awareness of that causal relation is hate (pt. 3, prop. 13). The very externality of the thing Enid loves makes her hate it: for she can never completely possess it, and thus must always feel the pains of anxiety and frustration (pt. 3, props. 13, 14; pt. 4, Appendix 19–20; pt. 5, prop. 20, Scholium). And when once we experience both love and hate toward the same object, the two emotions will ever thereafter be joined in our thought of that object (pt. 3, prop. 14). In short: Enid’s love for Felix is a kind of bondage, born of her passivity. Since it is her nature to flourish, she hates her bondage, and both hates and loves its cause. The person who loves endeavors to keep present and to preserve that which she loves; the person who hates endeavors to remove and destroy that which she hates (pt. 3, prop. 13, Scholium). But to live one’s life at the mercy of hate and retributive desire is to live “a miserable life indeed” (pt. 4, prop. 44, prop. 46, Scholium).

Spinoza adds at this point that hatred can be overcome and “extinguished” by love, and that “he who strives to overcome hatred with love is surely fighting a happy and carefree battle” (pt. 4, prop. and Scholium 46). But it is so far mysterious to Enid how any such victory could be accomplished. Surely it is not through her erotic love for Felix that she will conquer the ambivalence attendant on that love. For Spinoza’s arguments have shown her that the more she focuses on that love the more unbalanced will be her hate, and the more distorted and partial her vision of the world. The passage in question speaks of living under the “guidance of reason.” And we shall now see that it is intellectual guidance, and intellectual love, that will set Enid free.

Spinoza teaches Enid that understanding brings freedom. But what is this understanding, and how does it free? In the Platonic ascent, all Enid’s reflection is directed toward the good; and it will propel her upward only if she is willing to see the good as essentially unified and harmonious, her initial love as forming simply one piece of a larger benign whole. Spinoza, however, promises her that she need not circumscribe her vision in this way, not need she lose sight of the
particularity of each thing’s essential nature. She needs only to take up a new attitude to the same things, making them objects of intellectual understanding.\textsuperscript{16}

The crucial fact she must recognize is that mind as such is free; its power cannot be checked by nature’s influences. Insofar as her mind is lodged in a body, and insofar as the body needs a certain support from the world of nature, thus far mind is itself not free from external causal influences (pt. 5, props. 2, 3). But thought is by its own nature something free from passivity, something active and under our control. It is by focusing on the active power of her mind, and by deploying that power in understanding herself and her predicament, that Enid will overcome the ambivalence of her love. Her love is a confused cognition, Spinoza repeatedly insists—meaning by this that in its obsessive character it presents what is significant and salient in the world in a distorted way, and presents our own powerlessness to ourselves in a way that is both unclear and false. Turn the light of reflection on that emotion, however, and it will begin to be transformed: “A passive emotion ceases to be a passive emotion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it” (pt. 5, prop. 3); “the more an emotion is known to us, the more it is within our control, and the mind is less passive in respect of it” (pt. 5, prop. 3, Corollary). So far she has been living in her love, allowing her mind to be “extinguished.” But suppose she begins to wake up, and to ask herself about the origins of her love, its merits, its overall role in her life—then the emotion itself will appear to her with a new clarity, and it will no longer simply inundate her. Seeing its causes and its effects, she will begin to have the idea that she can manage and control it. And the very activity of understanding itself, with its exhilaration born of secure control, itself assists control: for it diminishes the urgent need for a completion that only another person’s body can supply. As Spinoza says: “insofar as we understand the causes of pain, it ceases to be a passive emotion; that is, to that extent it ceases to be pain” (pt. 5, prop. 18, Scholium).

Enid turns, then, to the causal analysis of her love for Felix. But in order to describe it well she must grasp the idea it instantiates, and its place in the causal nexus of nature as a whole. She must, that is, turn her thoughts both to philosophy and to natural science. She might do this by writing a series of lectures on the emotions. And it is not a trivial fact about this very series of lectures that, regardless of their normative content, relatively favorable to the emotions, they do, insofar as they are thought about emotions and their causes, have very much the properties that Spinoza mentioned: they distance their writer from passive immersion in the emotions themselves. Spinoza seems correct to say that the
understanding of one’s own pain can be one of the most exhilarating activities in the world.

But the therapy undertaken by Enid under Spinoza’s guidance will not produce lectures exactly like these lectures. They will differ in both form and content. Their content will be designed to sever her thoughts from her obsessive concern with a single object (pt. 5, prop. 2); they will do this, above all, by asking her to focus on general causal patterns, and on her love as merely one instance of a larger design (pt. 5, props. 9, 11; 20 Scholium). And they will ask her to see the larger pattern as necessitated through and through, the entire natural world as an orderly deterministic system in which no particular exists in isolation (pt. 5, prop. 6).

These general metaphysical and scientific thoughts soon take her well beyond the world of particular human interactions, and well beyond the topic of emotions. That topic would eventually become tiresome to her, and she would regard the choice to give the Gifford Lectures on that topic alone as a sign of continued bondage, no doubt indicative of other sorts of bondage in life. She would not be wrong. Enid’s Gifford Lectures will be about the entire order of the universe, in its interlocking harmony. That is to say, they will be about God.

The understanding of God is not for Spinoza, as the understanding of the forms is for Plato, opposed to or contrasted with an understanding of particular things. “The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God” (pt. 5, prop. 24). But particulars are understood in a special way—that is to say, under the form of eternity, playing the part they play in the eternal causal sequence of the universe. This knowledge brings a special kind of contentment, and a special kind of love—an elation that is accompanied by the idea of oneself, and also of God, as its cause.

This love is not contingent on any particular state of the body, or on any external event. Therefore it need not come to a halt at any time (pt. 5, prop. 34, Corollary; prop. 37). Nor is it tarnished by ambivalence (pt. 5, prop. 18, Corollary). And since it is the common property of all human beings, she will not envy anyone else this understanding, but will realize that the understanding is made the more complete the more people enjoy it (pt. 5, prop. 20; pt. 4, prop. 35; contrast pt. 4, props. 32–34). This means that, far from keeping her insight to herself, she will communicate it to others. By explaining her Gifford lectures on natural theology to Felix, she will overcome her ambivalent love of him with true love. And in her own being she will overcome her hatred of a universe that makes her suffer with love of the entire order of things.
V

As a boy he longs for his mother’s good-night kiss. There is an aching absence in his soul that he calls love. He wants to be filled up, consoled, comforted, he wants the nullification of the acute pain of feeling and thought. And even though the kiss brings comfort, its effect is so transient that its happy imminence is already tainted with the pain of its departure, “so much so that I reached the point of hoping that this good night which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared.” But the price of the absence of pain, that is to say of love, is the extinction of awareness, the absence, one might say, of a life. Habit, making things habitable, prevents him from truly dwelling in himself. He wishes to possess the entirety of his life, which is to say the story of his longing, without the terrible intermittence of love itself, with a constancy and solidity of consciousness that neither love itself nor its protective reflex habit will permit.

Proust’s novel contains traces of many philosophical accounts of love and its therapy. But the Platonist ascent tradition informs the structure of the narrative at a deeper level, I think, than any other, giving the narrator a pivotal image for the trajectory of his thought and desire. In a composite allusion to both the Symposium and the Phaedrus, placed at the heart of his theoretical account of his own literary project and its material in his life, he writes:

Every individual who makes us suffer can be attached by us to a divinity of which he or she is a mere fragmentary reflection, the lowest step in the ascent that leads to it, a divinity or an Idea which, if we turn to contemplate it, immediately gives us joy instead of the pain which we were feeling before—indeed the whole art of living is to make use of the individuals through whom we suffer as a series of steps enabling us to draw nearer to the divine form which they reflect and thus joyously to people our life with divinities. (3:935)

Here we see not only the Platonic idea of using individuals as steps on the way to a general form that they imperfectly instantiate, but also the idea, common to both Plato and Spinoza, that an intellectual project addressed to the material of one’s life converts life’s pain to solid joy. We now need to examine the way in which this idea is worked out in the novel: asking, first, why it is that the love of real people in life yields only agony and instability, and, second, why the ascent of love should take the form of narrative art.

Love is a form of painful awareness of a gap or lack in the self. It has its roots in the child’s unhappy anxious longing for his mother; this
desire to possess an elusive source of comfort colors every subsequent love. When Albertine makes her appearance on the beach, in the company of the little band of cyclists, what singles her out for him as an object of desire is not her beauty, for they all are beautiful, not her kindness, for they all appear bold and hard, “with an air of agility and guile” (1:848). It is the evidence of a separate unpossessable life in the eyes that defiantly meet his own:

If we thought that the eyes of such a girl were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But we sense that what shines in those reflecting discs is not due solely to their material composition; that it is, unknown to us, the dark shadows of ideas that that person cherishes about the people and places she knows—the turn of race-courses, the sand of cycling tracks over which, pedalling on past fields and woods, she would have drawn me after her, . . . and above all that it is she, with her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will. I knew that I should never possess this young cyclist if I did not possess also what was in her eyes. And it was consequently her whole life that filled me with desire. (1:851–52)

His love of Albertine follows the pattern set by this beginning: excruciating longing, issuing in projects of possession and control that can never be fulfilled, punctuated by moments of comfort that are tainted before they arrive either by the pain of jealousy or by the deadness of indifference.

Proust asks Enid to recognize—reading this story as the reader of her own love and desire, using the text as her “optical instrument,” so as to see herself more clearly (3:949)—that ordinary love brings no joy. Even the pleasure she longs for with Felix is “in fact only experienced inversely,” through the anguish of its incompleteness and instability (3:909). Nor can she, from her position of immersion within her own life, even understand the structures of that life: for the routines of life conceal from the self the structure of its own love, with its oscillation between anguish and deadness, its repetitious and obsessive pursuit of the impossible (3:932). Moreover, within life itself she can never achieve toward Felix himself either accurate vision or altruism: all her dealings with him are marred by her self-comforting aims.

The ascent of love is made possible by art—both by reading works of fiction and, even more, by writing one’s own life story.¹⁹ The goal of the ascent is to turn one’s own life into a work of literature. This is a labor more of decipherment than of creation, as one probes one’s past for the text “which has been dictated to us by reality, the only one of which the ‘impression’ has been printed in us by reality itself” (3:914). The raw materials of this work are impressions that have been stored up in us by
life itself (3:914); these must be recaptured and then assembled by the work of memory and intellect, until in the end we have recovered our own lost selves (3:935). This task, the inverse of the usual operations of daily life, in which we live "with our gaze averted from ourself" (3:932), is accomplished in works of art. It is for this reason that it is only the work of art, and not daily life, that can fully be called life (3:932, 931).

Before Enid can attempt Proust's task with any hope of success, she must sever her connection with Felix, and, indeed, with all the people she has loved, and seek an undisturbed condition within which the internal "book" of passion may be discovered. She should not attempt this, if possible, until she has loved a number of different people—for the reality that is characteristic of literary art requires the grasping of general forms, and this, in turn, requires many experiences (3:945). The artist in her is delighted not by this or that particular love, but by a general form of love and desire that emerges from all the concrete experiences, in the unity of one portion of her past with another: for she "is nourished only by the essences of things"; in these alone she finds her "sustenance and delight" (3:905). The material of creation will not be only the good and fine in things, as Plato argued. She will find in the painful, the hateful, the despicable, the grotesque rich material for her contemplation.

She will now see the unity of one past love with another, and of what she has called love with other pains (for example, the pain of travel) that she has not previously connected with love (3:911). The pain of her love for Felix must now "detach itself from individuals so that [s]he can comprehend and restore to it its generality" (3:933–34). Reaching back to their love in memory, she will now view him as a model who has "quite simply been posing for the artist at the very moment when, much against [her] will, they made [her] suffer most" (3:939). And in this way, in the very process of causing her pain, Felix has brought his stone "for the building of the monument" that is her narrative artwork (3:941). In fact, she will come to think that he really never was much more for her than a projective construct of her own imagining and desire, a fictional character already; and the austere truth of this recognition will console her for the fact that he did not love her enough (3:932–33).

Remembering the pain of love will itself be painful: and she will relive her suffering, Proust argues, with the courage of a doctor who experiments on himself (3:942). But the suffering is mitigated by the narrative project in which it is embedded. For the life of art is a life of joy. The raw material of self-knowledge and artistic expression is pain. But to use this pain as raw material for a work of universal communicative power and formal beauty is a profound delight (3:935). It not only supplies the artist with an endlessly fascinating active task, subject to no circumstan-
tial vicissitudes and managed by her alone; it also enables her to escape her own bondage to the present moment and to possess the form of her life as a whole, defeating time and moving as close to immortality as any human being can (3:905–6).

One might suppose that in this life the good of other human beings does not figure at all. This is in a way true, since Felix has ceased to exist for her as a real person with real needs. On the other hand, the work of the artist gives readers a powerful tool of self-understanding that they may use to uncover the reality of their own selves, and thus progress toward their own immortality. Indeed, Proust instructs Enid at this point that, earthly relationships being marred as they are by jealousy and personal longing, it is only in the act of creating a work of art, in the artist’s sense of obligation to her theme and to her audience, that true giving to others may take place.

VI

We have three accounts of a love that has love’s energy, beauty, and wonder without crippling passivity, without distraction, without ambivalence—a love that supports reflection rather than seeking its extinction, a love that embraces the entire world with even-handed joy. If in Plato the lover confined her attentions to the fine and good, Spinoza and Proust show that this need not be the case: contemplation can also find joy in the ugly and the grotesque, and even, and above all, in the lover’s own history of pain.

What has love given up, in so ascending?

First, there is an issue about altruism. Platonic love has sometimes been criticized as selfish and acquisitive, in its focus on possession of the good. This seems not quite right: for as the lover progresses there is, as Plato, Spinoza, and Proust all show, less and less desire to possess or control individual people, less jealousy, less selfishness in the usual sense.

On the other hand, we have to say that if egoism is absent, altruism is not unambiguously in evidence. Love does create valuable works that give something to human society at large. But it does not create in order to enhance the good of the loved one, viewing the loved one’s life as worthy of concern for its own sake.

Felix remains important to Enid in two ways: as a vehicle for creation, and as a part of the reality that contemplation studies with intellectual joy. In Plato, he will turn out to be a relatively insignificant vehicle for creative thought and speech, since he will be seen to contain so much less goodness than other objects she can contemplate. In Spinoza’s view,
he fares somewhat better, since she may study the whole of him and not simply his goodness, and since the understanding of her own history is permitted to play a particular role in transcending her pain. And in Proust's he fares best of all, since he will be a major source for the work of art she will create. Nonetheless, we have to say that Felix himself, and the happiness of Felix, vanish from view. He is, to use Proust's image, just an artist's model, just an occasion for a creation. If she acts beneficently for his sake, it is only insofar as he is a part of the whole world to which her creative activity is addressed.

As for the good of humanity generally, there is certainly a sense in which the Platonic lover pursues it, through creative thought and speech. But notice that this is incidental to the precise description of her goal. In Plato, the goal is to produce creations in which one lives on, immortal. Need these creations be helpful gifts to humanity? This is not clear. In Spinoza, the goal is intellectual love of God, a deathless mental act; and this goal, again, seems to be, strictly speaking, independent of any good this love may do in the world, even if good frequently does attend it. In Proust, finally, despite all the rhetoric of altruism, it is perfectly clear that the artist's primary aim is her own immortality, not the improvement of the reader.

Second, we have a question about the individual as object of Enid's love. For the effect, and, indeed, the driving purpose of the ascent seems to be to leave the individual behind.

We need at this point to make a further distinction. The intuitive notion of individuality we use in making this observation has two distinct components; an agency-component and a qualitative component. That is, talk of concern for the individual may refer, on the one hand, to the importance of regarding persons as distinct centers of choice and activity; it may refer, on the other hand, to the importance of recognizing their qualitative distinctness from one another. These two components of individuality are separable, both logically and empirically. One may be seen as a choosing subject without being seen as qualitatively unique, and vice versa.

I turn first to agency. The Platonic lover, who focuses on an object of love as the seat of valuable or interesting properties, and therefore as a suitable vehicle for creation, seems to neglect in the process the object's own subjecthood. From the moment she gets onto the Platonic ladder, Enid does not concern herself with what Felix does or chooses—but only with what, in terms of goodness, he is. From her contemplative viewpoint, there is no difference between loving a person and loving a scientific system, or a wonderful work of art. Much the same is true for Spinoza: she will view every part of nature as a part of an interlocking whole, and the distinction between agents and other parts becomes
relatively insignificant. In Proust, the agency of the beloved object is central—but as a primary cause of the artist’s past suffering. In her cured artistic condition, Enid will regard Felix only as a model, the origin of a literary character; and the freedom to manipulate that character belongs entirely to her.

As for qualitative distinctness, this also plays an ever diminishing role in the increasingly contemplative concern of the Platonic lover. Her love neglects Felix’s flaws and imperfections: anything that cannot be seen as fine and good does not even enter her thought about him once she is on the ladder. It also neglects his morally neutral idiosyncrasies, which her earlier love cherished. Again, in Enid’s original love all this is embraced; in Platonic love it is not. And this means that it neglects his body. For though as a Platonist Enid may see his body as the seat of beauty and fineness, to see a body that way is not to see it as the unique body of a person whom one passionately loves and desires. Her erotic desire was directed toward his body as a whole, and toward the body as animated by his particular life—toward his sweat, the “hair in his eyes,” “his thighs, his springy legs, hair in uneven dark patches on his chest, belly, at his groin” (YMR 187). All this the Platonic lover has climbed too high to see. Finally, she neglects his history, the fact that he has a unique career through space and time, that his thoughts and experience have been shaped by a career that is his and nobody else’s. All this earthly love embraces, and Platonic love does not.

Are things different with Spinoza and Proust? Spinoza does permit Enid to see Felix as a particular—for after all, that is what everything is. But increasingly it is not the specificities of his particularity that interest her. And for therapeutic purposes she will be actively discouraged from focusing on those concrete aspects of him, such as his body, that used to inspire her with need and longing. Proust’s narrator does continue to see the particular loves of his past—but only as so many signs of general essences. It is for this reason that when Enid writes her Proustian artwork the man she will portray there will not be Felix in all of his concreteness. It will be a rather abstract composite of several parts of her history. It will not be surprising if the resulting literary character is as lacking in particularity as Albertine—whose individuating traits fluctuate inconstantly through the novel.

These points about agency and qualitative specificity are not simple. For the Platonic ascent has also given up much that would cause impediments to individual love in both of these senses. The jealous insecure lover hates the freedom of the other—and a central idea in both Spinoza and Proust is to produce a love free of that kind of possessive grasping. Nor can a lover preoccupied with her own need and insecurity do very well in seeing truly the real particularity of the other:
for personal need often forms a fog that obscures a clear perception. It is for this reason that Proust holds that only literary artists and their readers, free of jealousy, can see the particularity of another’s mind.

But if many obstacles to individual love are left behind, we have to say that it is because the individual, as such, has been eliminated. And this, I think, is a function of the place from which the contemplative ascent begins. For it begins with an understanding of love that is, in a significant way, infantile: that sees the wish of love in terms of the restoration of totality and a “golden age” needless state. Rather than learning to live in a world in which every lover must be finite and mortal, the contemplative lover finds marvelously ingenious devices to satisfy the desires of infancy—deploying, to remarkable effect, the wonder and curiosity that are so prominent in the cognitive life of infancy. Rather than achieving a form of interdependence appropriate to an adult, this lover has continued to seek the bliss of totality, and has for this very reason had to depart from a world in which the infant’s wishes can never be satisfied.

There is an odd irony in this situation. For the teachers of the contemplative ascent all claim as the chief benefit of contemplation that it delivers a condition free from dependency. They depict contemplative creativity as a free act, chosen in pure positive joy, without the pressure of need. But why do they choose such a radical goal? Why do they give up the daily world and its people? We have to say, because of need. Because their anguish about the condition of infantile dependency was so acute, so unendurable, they could brook no compromises with life. Because human life was so excruciating they had to become godlike.

The real Enid in Oates’s novel follows Plato’s advice. Becoming pregnant by Felix, she has an abortion. Her shame and guilt, her anger, her pain, his shame and guilt—make it impossible for them to love one another again. But the piano lessons Felix gave her as a gift became her new life. Closed to all individual love, she thinks of him only as a portion of her painful past, and as the facilitator of her present transcendence. She enters a major conservatory. On the day of her arrival, she sits in the empty practice room, realizing the joy of her new life, and her unimpeded activity:

Enid adjusted the stool to her height and sat running her fingers along the keyboard, feeling still those waves of happiness rising, mounting, a giddiness that was like drunkenness as she thought how privileged she was, how privileged she’s been, merely sitting at a piano playing perfectly ordinary scales, chords—arpeggios in particular always soothed and calmed her, a consolation for any
kind of loss, or nearly—the fact, so very simple, yet miraculous, that the piano’s music was there inside the instrument waiting to be struck.

She played one of the little Mozart rondos she’d memorized for Mr. Lesnovich. . . . She was calmed by the rondo’s sunny logic and by the mere act of moving her slightly stiffened fingers along the keys, hearing subtleties of sound in this particular piano new to her and intriguing. . . . Playing the rondo another time Enid steeled herself for a mysterious resistance from the keyboard that sometimes balked her when she was feeling a piece begin to take hold, easing from her and her quick-darting thoughts, listening to herself playing as if from a distance—her fingers, her arms, her very breathing controlling the passage of notes while she herself stood apart, critical and attentive. But there was no resistance this time. The piece began to take hold, to fly. The composition fascinated her beyond her own exertion. . . . its wily delicacy, its logic, simplicity, humor, these small graceful tricky turns and subtle resolutions, a piece of music written circa 1770 now being played on a morning in May 1956 with nothing intervening, or so it seemed—not the pianist, not the instrument itself. (YMR 423–24)

That is her triumph, her transcendence. Behind it, beneath it, its wonder and pain motivating it, mastered and therefore murdered, is her love.

BROWN UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 Joyce Carol Oates, You Must Remember This (New York, 1987), p. 181; hereafter cited in text as YMR.
4 I have examined this account at length in my The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 6; here I am far briefer, and I focus on the material about creation, which I did not treat in the earlier project, and on some important divergences from my earlier interpretation. For an account of the other speeches, and of the background traditions about eros, see my “Platonic Love and Colorado Law,” Virginia Law Review, 80 (1994), 601–738.
7 I discuss this question earlier in the Gifford Lectures, referring in particular to Christopher Bollas’s The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unknown Thought (London, 1989), from whom the phrase “transformational object” derives.
8 In what follows, I use "fine" rather than "beautiful" to translate kalon, in order to bring out the fact that it is a highly general moral-aesthetic term, treated here as interchangeable with "good."
9 For the apparent interchangeability of kalon and agathon in Diotima’s argument, see esp. S 204E, 201C.
12 Usually the steps up the ladder are taken to be (1) one fine body, (2) all fine bodies, (3) fine souls, (4) the fine in laws and customs, (5) the fine in sciences, (6) the wide sea of the fine, (7) the fine itself. But notice that in the text the third and fourth steps are actually presented as one: the consideration of the soul itself forces the consideration of customs and laws. I have tried here to convey the mechanism through which I believe this takes place.
14 Some of this influence is mediated by the Stoic tradition of therapy, which itself is in many ways indebted to Platonism, but which adds other features that are of particular interest to Spinoza, in particular the interest in distinguishing active control from passive dependence. On this see Martha Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics (Princeton, 1994), chs. 9–12.
15 A wonderful account of Spinoza's therapy, to which I am much indebted (although I do not agree with it in all respects) is in Amelie Rorty, "Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love," in Solomon and Higgins, The Philosophy of Erotic Love. In citations from Spinoza, I shall in general use The Ethics and Selected Letters, tr. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis, 1982); hereafter cited in text.
16 This aspect of Spinoza's therapy is particularly well treated by Amelie Rorty (1991), and I am in a large measure of agreement with her more detailed account in what follows.
18 Where Moncrieff and Kilmartin render "degré," literally, as "step." I have written "series of steps," which conveys more accurately, I think, the distributive meaning of the original. The passage is a fragment in Proust's journals, without a clear placement in the text. It has been inserted by editors into the middle of a discussion of truths derived from reality by the intellect as opposed to impressions of memory. This does not seem quite right, since the passage alludes to the whole work of the artist in basing his narrative on past loves.
19 It is unclear, as also in Plato and Spinoza, whether the ascent is thought to be available to all human beings, or only to those who are specially talented. Proust, like Spinoza, tends to portray the artist's success as depending on a special effort of will and on a renunciation of which few would be capable. It is this mode of life about all that sets the artist apart from the crowd. He writes that all people have the materials of art within them, but most do not seek to shed light on them; therefore their past is "like a photographic dark-room encumbered with innumerable negatives which remain useless because the intellect has not developed them" (3.931).
20 Moncrieff and Kilmartin translate, "Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature" (3.931). But
it has recently been recognized that Proust's illegible handwriting actually has "pleinement," "fully," and not "réellement," "really," at this point.

21 Many of these points were also made about Plato in Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato," in his *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 1ff.

22 See 3:874: "In this book in which there is not a single incident which is not fictitious, not a single character who is a real person in disguise, in which everything has been invented by me in accordance with the requirements of my theme."